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INTERACTIONS BETWEEN THE AGRICULTURAL SECTOR AND THE HIV/AIDS PANDEMIC: IMPLICATIONS FOR AGRICULTUREAL POLICY*

by

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BACKGROUND: In Africa, HIV/AIDS is not simply a problem for Ministries of Health to address. Mitigating the spread and the consequences of HIV/AIDS requires a coordinated approach involving agencies responsible for agriculture, health, trade and commerce, and finance. Based on projections of future demographic change in the hardest-hit countries of eastern and southern Africa, the full impacts of HIV/AIDS on the agricultural sector are only just starting to manifest, and will intensify over the next several decades.

It is critical that agricultural policy makers anticipate the changes that HIV/AIDS will bring to the agricultural and rural sector, and proactively respond through the development of policies and programmes that factor in these projected impacts of the disease. Because many policies and programmes take years to implement and provide tangible results only after a long time lag, there is indeed urgency to put in place an appropriate set of public investments and programmes that can cushion the blow by the time the long-wave impacts of AIDS are in full force, rather than respond reactively after crises caused by structural changes in the economy have already manifested

OBJECTIVE: This work considers how the design of agricultural policies and programmes might be modified to better achieve policy objectives in the context of countries with severe HIV epidemics and underscores the central role of agricultural policy in mitigating the spread and impacts of the epidemic.

FINDINGS/IMPLICATIONS: Based on projections of future demographic change in the hardest-hit countries of eastern and southern Africa, HIV/AIDS is likely to have the following effects on the agricultural sector: (1) increased rural inequality caused by disproportionately severe effects of AIDS on relatively poor households; (2) a reduction in household assets and wealth, leading to less capital-intensive cropping systems for severely affected communities and households; and (3) problems in transferring knowledge of crop husbandry and marketing to the succeeding generation of African farmers.

It is argued that -- even though the absolute number of working age adults in the hardest-hit countries is projected to remain roughly the same over the next two decades -- the cost of labour in agriculture may rise in some areas as increasing scarcity of capital (notably, animal draft power for land preparation and weeding) will increase the demand for labour in agricultural production or shift agricultural systems to less labour- and capital-intensive crops.

We suggest that one of the most important ways in which agricultural policy can contribute to reducing the spread and consequences of AIDS is to contribute effectively to poverty reduction. Risky sexual behaviours are at least partially related to limited opportunities to earn a livelihood through other means.

Relatedly, perhaps the most effective means for agricultural policy to respond to HIV/AIDS will entail focusing on raising incomes associated with agricultural growth: This will involve (1) investing in agricultural research to generate improved technologies capable of raising the productivity of crop and livestock systems; (2) rehabilitating agricultural extension services; (3) instituting crop and input marketing systems that contribute to small scale farmers productivity and food security.

As stated by du Guerny, it is understandable that a sectoral ministry might be reluctant to engage itself in an area in which it possesses no real competence and could be perceived as treading on the authority of the Ministry of Health. But there is a need to systematically address the contribution that Ministries of Agriculture could make toward the goals of (1) preventing the spread of HIV; (2) supporting people living with HIV and AIDS; (3) reducing the vulnerability of individuals and communities to HIV/AIDS; and (4) alleviating the socio-economic and human impact of the epidemic.

These suggestions clearly do not mean that all agricultural policies should be modified in ways that contribute to these four goals. Some government actions can potentially make a huge contribution to reducing the spread and impacts of AIDS without seriously compromising other important development objectives, while other government policy changes might have a modest contribution to reducing the spread of AIDS but at a huge opportunity cost in terms of foregone agricultural productivity and income growth, which could exacerbate poverty and misery rather than alleviate it.

Examples in the latter category might be labour policies that attempt to impede migration. While peoples' migration off the farm to seek better employment opportunities in urban areas, mines, and commercial farms may increase the spread of AIDS -- especially in the absence of other policies devoted to education and behaviour change -- policies designed to limit migration would almost certainly exacerbate poverty and land pressures in densely populated rural areas. While migration is part of the problem, there may be ways to modify conditions of migration to encourage relocation of families rather than individuals. Likewise, the

promotion of food crops that may be more nutritious per kilogram produced but which provide less nutrition or income per unit of land or labor input may not necessarily be in the best interests of rural households or HIV/AIDS mitigation.

It is proposed that assessments of policies be cast in a cost-benefit framework, taking into consideration the general equilibrium effects that may occur outside the agricultural sector. This will indeed be a daunting task because of limitations on data and models to empirically incorporate such intricate cross-sectoral effects.

Lastly, we suggest that it is important to ask what can we learn from countries where major progress has already been made in reducing the spread of HIV (e.g., Uganda)? If the ingredients of success can be replicated more broadly, then doing so in a proactive way may be one of the most effective ways by which governments and donors can not only support their agricultural and rural development objectives, but also save millions of lives that can contribute to society more broadly.

* Full paper is downloadable at:
www.aec.msu.edu/agecon/fs2/adult_death/cross_cutting/idp25.pdf

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